Cal Poly Views

Historical Preservation with Dr. David Bess

Cal Poly Pomona University Library

Historical Preservation Summary

Cal Poly Views was a weekly interview series broadcast on radio station KWOW-AM. Episodes were 15 minutes long and were hosted by Cal Poly Pomona Director of News and Publications, Ed Pierce, in conversation with Cal Poly Pomona faculty or administrators on general interest topics.

Dr. David Bess was chair of the Urban and Regional Planning department at Cal Poly Pomona. He was a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a former member of the board of directors of the Californians for Preservation Action, and studied historic preservation trends in the western United States.

Subject Headings

Historic preservation

Pomona Valley Region (Calif.)

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Cal Poly Views Historical Preservation with Dr. David Bess

July 31, 1985

Interview conducted by Ed Pierce
Transcribed by Lorecel Gravino

EP: K-WOW presents "Cal Poly Views."

EP: Hello everyone, welcome to K-WOW's presentation of "Cal Poly Views." 15 minutes each week devoted to interviews concerning subjects of current general interest and featuring faculty or administrators from Cal Poly Pomona. This is your host Ed Pierce, talking today with Dr. David Bess chair—Professor of Urban and Regional Planning and chair of that Department at Cal Poly Pomona.

EP: Together we'll discuss historic preservation: roots to the past. Today's guest, Dr. Bess, is a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and a former member of the board of directors of the Californians for Preservation Action. He has taught classes in historic preservation, served as consultant to the city of Long Beach responsible for a survey of historic sites in that city, and on a sabbatical leave two years ago studied historic preservation in the West.

EP: Welcome, Dave Bess.

DB: Thank you very much, Ed.

EP: To begin this, are we catching up with the rest of the country on some of our historic preservation?

DB: Oh, I think we are. For a long time, preservationists talked about Mount Vernon, Colonial Williamsburg, all the marvelous things back east, but they tended to discount what we have out here. Part of that was because it was newer, part of it was that it was very different from the things that they had identified as part of our colonial heritage.

EP: The colonial people weren't necessarily Victorian architecture lovers?

DB: No, a lot of the things that they were trying to strip off in order to get back to the essence of colonial architecture back east, are the things we would have saved out here. Our development starting much later than theirs, features a lot of the Victorian, a lot of the Craftsman, and a lot of the things that have come down to us even in recent years. It's really quite an extraordinary sort of heritage and it's one that's being recognized.

EP: When we talk historic preservation, explain whether we're talking principally public buildings or private residential homes.

DB: What's happening now is that people are starting to see the importance of maintaining the landmarks on their own block. For a long time, historic preservation meant museums, old houses that someone had saved and made collections of things from the Spanish-American War, so that people could come and learn about the past that way. Now we're seeing the importance of trying to keep alive some of those marvelous things that have been developed in the past, because they are still usable. Instead of tearing down old buildings we're recognizing that sometimes it costs less to restore them, when you do you get rich detail marble spaces great craftsmanship all the things that that make those things exciting.

EP: There is a—what do I want to call it—an organization or a place, the National Registry of Historic Places.

DB: The National Registry of Historic Places, is maintained by the federal government. That's a listing of those sites and buildings that are important in terms of history or design, because of association with famous people or famous events. And it's more than just the big major landmarks that you think of like, Fort Ticonderoga. It includes things that are of local significance that might include commercial buildings, it might have a city hall on it. It might have a historic neighborhood in the local area. You have lots of good examples. Some of the best known in Southern California would include things like Carol Avenue in Los Angeles, the Gas Lamp District in San Diego, and then right in our local area there are lots of good examples of famous things that people have seen and known and loved.

EP: Let's go ahead and name some of those, if you will.

DB: Well right here on the Cal Poly campus, the Kellogg Mansion. As you see coming down the San Bernardino freeway headed west, look over on the right, there's a marvelous old structure which was the residence for W.K. Kellogg, right here.

EP: Built in 1925, 1926.

DB: About in there, designed by the same man that designed the historic Mission Inn Riverside.

EP: I've got a small amount of trivia, I know about, that you're coming eastbound on over Kellogg Hill right if you look to the right you see two stone square pillars.

DB: Right!

EP: When prior to the freeway, or when that road was a two-lane road or even a dirt road, those pillars were the main entrance to the Kellogg Mansion at that time. So, you just turn off the road went into the pillars and you were there. But what about, what is it, Lincoln Park?

DB: Lincoln Park in Pomona? Back at the turn of the century, Pomona was the principal city in this area and all the money was concentrated in there. When they began to develop the area around what's now known as Lincoln Park about 1907, some of the most magnificent homes were built. They're still there, they're still intact. It has a rich fabric that makes it unique, a marvelous place to live and a nice place to visit.

EP: Some of the other things that are really unique to this area, when we were a citrus area, with miles and miles and acres of oranges and lemons and occasionally there were homes sitting in the middle of those acreages, we refer to as the Grove Homes.

DB: That's right, the Grove Houses. The Pitzer House in Claremont would probably be the best known of those. That's just a marvelous structure. And it's now been adapted, it's no longer being used for housing. It's turned into, I think a lawyer's office. There are other Grove Houses that you'll see some places out, still surrounded by citrus and some places where they've been enveloped by the cities they're in, part of neighborhoods.

EP: The old homes up North Euclid in Upland.

DB: Marvelous places.

EP: But because our towns or cities now, Ontario, Upland, La Verne, San Dimas, Claremont, Cucamonga, Alta Loma, all have roots that go back into the 1800s—of 1880s, 1890s—all have instances I presume, of candidates for preservation.

DB: Each one of them does, and we've started to see in probably the last 10 or 15 years, local groups that organize to recognize the importance of those places. There's sort of an adage in historic preservation, "that you have to lose something good before people understand the importance." The fact of the matter is we've lost some really nice things, but we have remaining some marvelous things.

EP: Do you think this is why there is increased awareness, in the last 10 years?

DB: I'm certain it is. A lot of it may be tied to the fact that a lot of people are searching for roots, a lot of it maybe because there is a recognition that things being built now don't always have the rich detail, the marvelous materials. A lot of it though, is that we've grown up with those things and we expect to see them when we go down the road. Sometimes, you go down and it's not there and that makes you look that much more closely in the others and then you know they're worth saving.

EP: Nearby, the entire west side of—or the West Colorado business district as it's referred to in Pasadena—has undergone a change and really a preservation and what's now termed, Old Town, I think.

DB: Right, that's spearheaded by Pasadena Heritage, which is a group of the national reputation for first, finding, recording, and then preserving important structures. They have a set of activities that include training docents and inducing developers to participate. West Colorado, has set a standard in terms of new ideas for preserving and making use of commercial buildings.

EP: Unfortunately, a lot of the old homes on South Orange Grove have been replaced by condos

DB: All of those are gone.

EP: But you've got the Wrigley Mansion, the Gamble House just north of Colorado.

DB: And Westmoreland Place.

EP: Yeah and some beautiful areas that I guess, they recognized that older isn't necessarily worse. What about a relationship, is there one between the preservationists and the developers?

DB: Yes, there is. For a long time, we planners, were viewed as villains by the preservationists, because so much of what we did was tied to new development and a lot of the preservation movement was anti-development. It was aimed frankly, at trying to stop developers. Then in the late 1970s, there began to be an understanding that preservation of old buildings made sense from an economic standpoint. They could be made usable for less money that it costs to go out and build new things.

EP: In some cases, adapted to another kind of use?

DB: Yes, the federal law recognizes that now and there are tax incentives for developers that want to go out and utilize existing old historic structures. Make them usable for new uses and make a profit at it. That's brought together the preservationist and the developers into a very important alliance.

EP: How old must an edifice or facility be, in order to be listed on the National Registry of Historic Places or to be qualified for a, some kind of a tax incentive?

DB: Typically, a building must be at least 50 years old, to qualify for the National Register. There are some times, when there are instances where there could be exceptions, but that's the general rule. If it's on the National Register, or if it's eligible to be placed on the National Register, it can qualify for the tax incentives.

EP: And are those the same in all states? Or do they differ?

DB: The federal tax incentives are uniform across the country. The states will have different programs and one of the things I was exploring on sabbatical was ways in which California differs from the other western states. California's a leader. It has in many ways put together programs that have made sense and it's now working very hard at trying to innovate, do some new things that will make it more attractive for property owners to maintain and preserve.

EP: There are two other areas that we haven't mentioned. I think of when I think of beautiful old homes and trees and all in California, Southern California one is Claremont, the other is Redlands. How are they doing in their preservation effort?

DB: We can't leave those out. Claremont especially, has been notable because it has had the leadership that has made preservation a community issue. They recently hosted the statewide historic preservation conference in Claremont and the reason it was there, was because they wanted to bring people in from all over the state to look at what Claremont has been able to do.

DB: Claremont's done a good job. One of the reasons I think it got started was because of the loss of the old library and the old Claremont Inn, now you see around the village lots of examples where they're trying to preserve that heritage.

DB: Redlands of course is another one. Redlands, if you've ever seen the old photograph that showed the private railroad cars parked at the Redlands rail station in the 1890s, was a place that attracted people from all over the East and there are great examples of Grove Houses, some marvelous commercial buildings and public buildings in the downtown area.

EP: To preserve a building, I think of two, Edwards Mansion and San Dimas Mansion.

DB: Yes.

EP: Is the restoration of those very expensive? Is it as much as you want to put into it?

DB: It can turn into a labor of love and I think that that's the way a lot of preservation efforts begin. In both those instances, they started off with the idea that they had unique things that could not be created starting from scratch and apparently, they've been able to turn a profit on it. I don't know the numbers involved in those. Whenever you talk to people involved in preservation it's very difficult to figure out the cost at the very beginning of a project. Because you never know what you run into, you don't know what the foundations will be like or what kinds of structural problems you might encounter.

EP: I've had the privilege the last two falls to visit a daughter in Winthrop, Connecticut, which is, claims to be, the oldest Christian community, Protestant community, I think in the state of Connecticut. Two years ago, when I was there, they were celebrating their 350th birthday that week. It's common to go through that town and see plaques on the buildings that have years such as 1614, 1650, 17--, and you you're looking at something that still lived in today, that's well more than 300 years old. I think that made me more aware than possibly other parts of the country how they preserve their roots. It's comforting to see that we're trying to do the same thing.

DB: One of the interesting things for me, has been that people don't always recognize when they're in a historic building. One of the valuable parts of the movement has been the survey process. Claremont for instance, has surveyed virtually the entire city in order to discover places that might have been forgotten. In doing so they found a lot of things that they just hadn't recognized that makes it a much richer process.

EP: David, in the Claremont, Upland, Alta Loma area there are these stone—they used to be pump houses—when citrus was there, are they being retained?

DB: Yes.

EP: Those are those are unique things to this this particular area.

DB: Very much so. There's a marvelous one up on Baseline in Claremont which is a Mission Revival style, stone, pump house, that's an extraordinary kind of accomplishment.

EP: The one up on Baseline and Benson.

DB: Yes.

EP: The one over west of there in the Claremont. Those are fascinating. If they don't—in a few more years—people who have not lived here or longer, “what is that? It’s too small” you know that's right so that they won't know.

DB: It's going to be hard because we're not talking about preserving everything and we're not talking about preserving things for museums. Those particular places, may be difficult in terms of structural problems. They’re not reinforced and you always have to think about earthquakes. I'd hope that we'll see those preserved and that somebody will come up with a way to use them. There's been marvelous ingenuity in the historic preservation movement, people have discovered things that you never would have thought of, ways to use historic structures. Claremont Tennis Club is an example of one of those structures that's a stone house that has been used now as a clubhouse—great idea.

EP: What is nice is we're in an area where there are so many examples that people can see and be reminded of.

EP: I thank you, David Bess, and thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for listening to this week's edition of “Cal Poly Views”—15 minutes devoted to discussing topics of current and general interest. If there are subjects which you would like to hear discussed by faculty or administrative experts from Cal Poly Pomona, please write to: Cal Poly Views, Office of News and Publications. 3801 W. Temple Ave, Pomona 91768.

EP: We hope you'll join us again next week at the same time for another interesting interview, when K-WOW presents “Cal Poly Views.” This is your host Ed Pierce, speaking.

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